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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the attitudes of Hong Kong English-as-a-Second-Language teachers concerning English language teaching problems in that context. The study was prompted by perceptions of declining interest in use of English, less frequent requirement of English skills for employment, increased use of colloquial Cantonese in social contexts, and difficulties with English instruction in the schools, particularly at the secondary level. Based on a discussion with ten teachers, a 26-item questionnaire was developed and administered to 79 teachers. Results revealed attitudinal patterns in three areas: resources; curriculum; and teacher competence. In the area of instructional resources, a majority of respondents felt that class sizes needed to be reduced and that the Hong Kong education authorities should provide additional supplementary teaching aids, information exchange, and in-service teacher training. Most respondents wanted a more flexible curriculum, textbooks geared to student level, and more classroom recreational reading materials to increase exposure to English. Respondents also felt that English teacher instructional skills are seriously deficient and should be improved. A majority felt that English should be used all the time for classroom interaction, but also that class time devoted to English should not be increased. The questionnaire is appended. (MSE)

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TEACHERS' VIEWS ON WAYS OF IMPROVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT

This paper first presents the background information of English language teaching in Hong Kong. Then it discusses the problems of ELT from the viewpoint of the researcher.

A survey is conducted in two stages to find out if practising teachers do see the problems in the same light as the researcher. The first stage involves ten teachers in discussions. Based on views expressed, a questionnaire is written. 79 teachers have responded to the survey. Data collected are shown under the headings of resources, curriculum and teacher competence. It is recommended that class size be reduced, teachers be given proper training and good resource materials be given to schools.

Background

Hong Kong is an international business and financial centre and English is the language for international communication. Even with the approach of 1997 when Hong Kong's sovereignty will be reverted to China, the usefulness of English does not seem to have declined in the business world. One would expect that there is strong motivation among Hong Kong students to learn English. However, it does not appear to be the case.

English is of restricted use in Hong Kong and is becoming increasingly so. Only in education, government and business do we sometimes have instrumental use for the language. It is quite common for small meetings to be conducted in Cantonese or Cantonese and English and the minutes written in English.

In a survey conducted in Dec 1992 (Lai & Jor,1993), 51% of the respondents reported that they need to use English for 51%-100% of their working hours while 18% said that they rarely use English at work.

In a recent analysis of the jobs advertised in the SCMP on two Saturdays, it was found that out of 154 graduate posts, 60% required fluency in both English and Chinese, 22% did not put in language requirement and 6% asked for proficiency in English only. It seems that English is not the only language to guarantee a good job nowadays and its importance in the eyes of parents or job seekers has somewhat decreased.

In the past, students learnt English for enjoyment as most of

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the popular songs were in English. Nowadays, the popularity of karaoke and the preference for Cantonese songs have promoted the use of colloquial non-literary Cantonese rather than English. Seldom do we find students learning English through songs on their own as in the old days.

Given such a strong Cantonese linguistic environment, students reported that there is no chance to use English apart from some English lessons at schools. In the words of a student, "We cannot think as quickly in English as in Chinese. To communicate more effectively we use Cantonese. When we dare not or don't want to use English, we have no practice and we think more slowly in English. So the vicious circle goes on."

Under such difficult conditions, teachers must have good English proficiency in order to conduct a lesson in fluent English at both primary and secondary school levels. However, this is something to be desired in many schools in Hong Kong. Very often, the most fluent speakers tend to go into business. In the words of a high school principal, " When the economy is good, teacher recruitment is difficult because there are many opportunities elsewhere; but when the economy is not good, recruiting a teacher is easy." (Lee, 1995)

The problems with ELT: some personal views

In my opinion, there are a few factors specific to the primary education which have led to low cost-effectiveness in English teaching. Firstly, lack of exposure to English because almost all teachers use Cantonese to deal with discipline problems and to get the meaning of text across faster. Secondly, lack of active language use because a lot of teachers assign homework in the form of vocabulary copying or memorization of spelling. Thirdly, lack of flexibility because many teachers stick to the syllabus whether the pupils have learnt the new item or not. On top of these, there is an abrupt change in the density and depth of learning materials from Primary 2 to 3 and weaker pupils fall behind at this point. As teaching goes on irrespective of learning, the weaker ones lag further and further behind.

In the secondary school level, the problem is more complicated because there are two issues: the teaching of English as a subject and the use of English as a teaching medium.

In the teaching of English, the wide range of English proficiency at the start of secondary one poses grave difficulties. The implementation of split class teaching (Note 1) has alleviated part of the problem because teachers can give more individual attention to students. Nevertheless, Education Commission Report No.4 (Hong Kong Government, 1990) reported that little improvement is achieved except in listening comprehension. I would attempt to give reasons for the lack of success. First, teachers in general use the same textbook with no adjustment for the lower proficiency group. Second, there are no additional interesting activities to

motivate the weaker students. Third, there are not enough supplementary (meaningful) exercises to help narrow the gap in language achievement between the split class students and the average to above average achievers.

Another problem at the secondary level is the mis-match between textbook and standard of students. In many schools, students are not learning from comprehensible materials because one textbook is used across the whole Form and the below average ones are struggling all the time. Motivation is thus low. There are not enough audio visual aids to facilitate learning and students find one-way teacher talk very boring. Although Hong Kong is rich enough to install equipments for the classroom such as video cassette recorder, television set, cassette tape recorder and headphones to provide quality exposure, there are few for the language teachers to use, usually one set of cordless headphones and a couple of cassette tape recorders for the whole school of about 1,000 students.

In senior secondary, some students feel that getting a good grade in English is not as important as getting a good grade in content subjects because the latter can help them to gain a place in the university. So among Science students, motivation is generally lower than Arts students.

When the proficiency of English is so low, obviously there are problems with using it as the medium of instruction. But schools are not keen to switch to mother tongue instruction because that will lead to a drop in the Banding of student intake (Note 2). In order to cover the syllabus in time, teachers resort to mixed code teaching, i.e. switching between Cantonese and English while teaching (Hirvela & Law, 1991).

The Survey

I am interested to see if the problems mentioned above are shared by other colleagues, i.e. whether my personal views of the ELT situation in Hong Kong are supported by empirical data collected from practising teachers.

To solicit teachers' views on ways to improve English language teaching, this survey was conducted in two stages. First a group of ten teachers were invited to an informal discussion on ELT. Based the points raised in the discussion, a questionnaire was written and given to participants in two workshops.

I have to admit that the sample is a bit biased in that the respondents are among the more active and confident teachers. But even if there was a random sampling, our experience was that those who returned the questionnaires would also be the more active teachers. Thus the 79 copies of questionnaire collected were considered to have reflected the views of teachers probably those who are more active and enthusiastic.

The questionnaire consisted of 26 statements based on views expressed in the discussion in stage one of this survey. The questionnaire and the responses in the form of percentages are shown in Appendix I.

Discussion on findings

The feedback from teachers will be grouped and discussed under several headings.

1) Resources:

The majority view was to have the class size reduced and to have better support from the Education Department in the form of teaching aids and teacher seminars/ workshops.

This is in line with my own obsveration of the split class as mentioned in the previous section. The fact that teachers in Hong Kong have to take care of 40+ students has discouraged some from entering the profession. If class size is reduced, better attention can be given to students resulting in better learning and stronger motivation. Most probably this will attract some more talented graduates into the teaching profession since the working environment is considered to be unfavourable at present.

Teachers wanted to share experience in teaching and asked for a good resource centre to borrow teaching aids from because very often they do not have the time to prepare teaching aids. Another problem is that many teachers are not trained to English and they may not have the expertise. The Working Group on Language Proficiency has given a fuller description of the situation:

" Annual Teachers Surveys of all schools show that a large proportion of language teachers have no training in language teaching. This is partly because the curriculum time taken up by the language subjects imposes a huge demand for teachers, pratly because the demand from business for people with good language skills reduces the supply of such people to schools, and partly, we believe, because language teachers have heavier workloads than teachers of most other subjects." (Hong Kong Government, 1994: 35)

The problem of untrained language teachers is often reflected in the monthly seminars on ELT run by the English Teachers' Group of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union. Therefore, if the Education Department would supply good video programmes for junior primary pupils to learn English in an enjoyable manner, e.g.singing or reciting rhymes (No.25 with 95% saying Yes); or tapes and worksheets with `listen and do' exercises to increase students exposure to English at home (No. 26 with 98% saying Yes) it would be most welcome by teachers and would have immediate benefit for the students.

2) Curriculum:

The majority of respondents wanted a more flexible curriculum

so that they can include activities for students to use English in real situations. They also wanted good textbooks geared at the level of the students and leisure reading materials in the classroom to increase English exposure.

Though the Education Department has introduced an Extensive Reading Scheme in junior secondary schools, more can be done to create a flexible curriculum to make learning more effective.

In the first discussion, some teachers raised the point about the usefulness of grammar teaching. But in this survey, it seems that teachers do not want grammar so much as only just over half of the respondents said Yes to statements 6 and 7.

Even though a few teachers talked about the insufficient time for teaching English in the first discussion, the respondents in this survey did not want any change to the existing time allocation as shown in statements 21 to 24. It is also evident that teachers do not want any change to the time for starting English (statements 19 and 20). Generally speaking, the responding teachers are happy with the duration and structure of ELT in Hong Kong.

3) Teacher Competence:

As explained in the quotation from the Working Group report in section 1), teachers may not have the language competence to teach well. This is strong felt by the respondents as shown in statements 11, 12, 17 and 18. Respondents felt that the language proficiency of English teachers should be up-graded. Only 22% of the respondents felt that the oral proficiency of teachers' is good enough. It is also quite alarming to find that only 17% of respondents felt that teachers are resourceful and knowledgeable enough to help our students. Perhaps this is a question for the teacher educators to think about when designing programmes. Perhaps the Education Department should also find ways and means to increase the number of trained language teachers in Hong Kong schools.

As so few considered teachers' oral proficiency to be good enough, it is understandable that 68% thought Cantonese can be used to help to teach English. However, 53% still thought that English should be used all the time during lessons.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings from the present survey supported some of the views of the researcher. Class size should be reduced. More resources should be deployed to provide interesting comprehensible language to the students for learning. Language teachers should have good English proficiency and be given proper training. The curriculum should be flexible enough to allow for meaningful activities. Yet the present time duration for English learning should be kept.

As the key issue is teachers' competence, the Education

Department has to make sure that teachers do have the right level of proficiency to teach. In the short run, when teacher proficiency cannot be raised that fast, teaching materials such as video or tapes can be provided to increase both the quantity and quality of language input.

Note 1: For the low English proficiency students, a class of 40 is split into 20 each with an additional teacher during English lessons.

Note 2: At the end of their primary education, children in Hong Kong are allocated a place in a secondary school based on their performance in Primary 5 and 6. There are five ability Bands each constituting 20% of the student population of a region. Seconday schools that take in a lot of Band One children are considered as academically strong. There was a case when a Band 2 school switched to mother tongue instruction and the student intake dropped to Band 4 in the following year.

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App.I The Questionnaire with responses in percentages:

We'd like to solicit teachers' views on ways to improve English language teaching in Hong Kong. Could you please indicate your opinion by ticking one of the answers, Yes, Not sure (NS) or No. Thank you very much!

	Yes	NS	No
1. We should reduce the class size in our schools.	93%	___	___
2. The Ed.Dept. should provide more audio-visual equipments such as TV cassette recorders.	90%	___	___
3. We should have good textbooks geared at the level of our students.	90%	___	___
4. We should not be constrained by the syllabus.	78%	___	___
5. There should be more group work or even out-door activities for students to use English in real situations.	90%	___	___
6. More grammatical exercises should be introduced in primary schools.	55%	30%	___
7. More grammatical exercises should be introduced in secondary schools.	68%	30%	___
8. There should be functions for teachers to share experience in teaching.	85%	___	___
9. There should be a well-equipped resource centre for teachers to borrow teaching aids.	95%	___	___
10. The Ed.Dept. should provide teaching packages (teaching aids, learning materials) at different levels for teachers.	98%	___	___
11. The English proficiency of Primary English teachers should be up-graded.	93%	___	___
12. The English proficiency of secondary English teachers should be up-graded.	88%	___	___
13. Reading materials, e.g. interesting books, magazines should be placed in the classroom for students to read when they are free.	83%	___	___
14. The curriculum should be more flexible to allow for a variety of activities.	83%	___	___
15. Cantonese can be used to help teaching English.	68%	23%	___

16. English should be used all the time during lessons. 53% ___ 23%

17. In general, teachers' oral proficiency is good enough. ___ 45% 33%

18. Hong Kong teachers are resourceful and knowledgeable enough to help our students. ___ 53% 30%

19. English should be taught from kindergarten one onwards. 70% 23% ___

20. English should be taught from Primary three onwards. ___ 23% 68%

21. The number of English lessons in a week should be increased in primary schools. 43% 33% ___

22. The number of English lessons in a week should be decreased in primary schools. ___ 20% 70%

23. The number of English lessons in a week should be increased in secondary schools. 43% 38% ___

24. The number of English lessons in a week should be decreased in secondary schools. ___ 28% 65%

25. The Ed.Dept. should supply good video programmes for junior primary pupils to learn English in an enjoyable manner, e.g.singing or reciting rhymes. 95% ___ ___

26. The Ed. Dept. should supply tapes and worksheets with `listen and do' exercises to increase students exposure to English at home. 98% ___ ___